

***Hope-Filled Advocacy
for Public Justice***

Love is a Better Way

GERALD VANDEZANDE, C.M, D.Litt

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Toronto, Ontario

At a special convocation on October 20, 2006, the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS) honoured Mr. Gerald Vandezande by awarding him the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters.

This is the first honorary degree ever offered by ICS under its Province of Ontario degree-granting legislation. It is appropriate that Gerald should be the first recipient as Gerald has long supported the mission of the Institute for Christian Studies to offer programs leading to Master and PhD degrees from a Christian perspective. He played a key role in helping ICS obtain the right to offer provincially accredited graduate degrees.

For thirty-five years until his retirement in 1998, Gerald worked as National Public Affairs Director for Citizens for Public Justice (www.cpj.ca) to promote justice in Canada and during that time had significant impact on social legislation and public policy debates. Deeply motivated by his Christian faith, Gerald continues to advocate for policy alternatives on issues such as aboriginal and refugee rights, educational justice, poverty, the environment, and national unity.

*Gerald has written many articles and books, the most recent being *Justice, Not Just Us: Faith Perspectives and National Priorities*. Gerald was invested into the Order of Canada by Her Excellency the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, Governor General of Canada, on October 17, 2001. The citation called him a "powerful and respected voice for social justice." Gerald was awarded the 2005 Arthur Kroeger College Award in Ethics in Public Affairs on February 9, 2005. Gerald is a member of the Grace Christian Reformed Church in Scarborough. He and his wife, Wynne, live in Agincourt, Ontario. Wynne is a retired social worker. They have two daughters and five grandchildren.*

These are notes for the remarks Gerald Vandezande, C.M., D.Litt. gave on the occasion of the conferral of his honorary doctorate.





As a long-time Canadian citizen by choice, and an independent, public-justice advocate by profession, I am most thankful for having enjoyed the privilege to be meaningfully involved in the path-breaking initiatives and ongoing witness of Citizens for Public Justice since 1963.

I am also deeply grateful that these historic initiatives were undertaken in concert with timely efforts by such national groups as Project North, in close cooperation with Aboriginal Peoples, successfully advocating a 10-year moratorium on northern pipeline construction; the Inter-faith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC), engaged in advocacy in Ontario for over 20 years; Fairness For Families, a unique venture by Ontario businesses, churches, trade-unions, and citizens groups to promote common-pause-day legislation; the Ontario Multi-Faith Coalition for Equity in Education (OMCEE), advocating legal equality and religious freedom in education all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada; the national Campaign Against Child Poverty (CACP), best known for its full-page public messages in major newspapers, especially the *Toronto Star*, challenging our federal government to eliminate worsening child poverty—and many other community-based social-justice groups and political-action organizations struggling to eliminate homelessness, hunger and other disgraceful injustices still shaming Canada today.

All of us, together with many others across Canada, have been determined that our country's laws, public policies and practices actually help to bring about real compassion, inclusive justice and enduring peace to desperate neighbours, vulnerable communities and the fragile creation—now and in the years ahead. The poor and

powerless, defenseless and voiceless deserve our active solidarity and support today in their ongoing struggles for human dignity, civil rights and social justice.

Indeed, we continue to be at a critical crossroads. Now more than ever our unique nation faces cultural, economic, environmental, educational, social and political crises. Today's crucial challenges increasingly require tough, wise choices—not only here at home but also abroad, especially in Africa and Asia, where the future of millions of God's creatures hangs in the balance. Think only of the unending crises and wars in the Middle East, the devastating human tragedy which is the AIDS pandemic, and the catastrophic, Holocaust-like situation of millions of vulnerable people in Darfur and Sudan.

Precious resources like oil and water increasingly become the focus of military warfare, while human needs are sacrificed on the altar of the Gross Domestic Product, and ploughshares are turned into swords and nuclear bombs for the sake of profit and power.

Let's face it: the economic and environmental clashes, the ethical and social conflicts, and the seemingly endless cultural and military wars are all extremely costly—even deadly. Clearly, they demand radical changes in our hearts, minds and daily lives, and in our respective views of the world. For only a fundamental change of heart and life can reverse today's worsening ways of death. A real change at this level could help to create lasting harmony, vibrant community and growing unity in the life-affirming service of a flourishing humanity and the integrity of God's good creation. For the issues of life flow from out of the heart (*Proverbs 4:23*). This means that the directions and structures of life, the ways of life and death flow from out of our most deeply-held convictions about the meaning and purpose of life in our inter-dependent world.

I am convinced therefore that the conscientious expressions of our heart-felt faith(s) and fundamental values, our basic beliefs and core commitments, expressed personally, communally, professionally and institutionally, are foundational to the renewal of Canada's national well-being and to the constant promotion of the common good of all people, both at home and abroad. Indeed, this kind of creative, concrete political-social participation within our pluralist nation genuinely respects Canada's multi-cultural, multi-faith mosaic, and it will strengthen our public life together.

I am further convinced that a non-partisan yet passionate

political engagement is utterly essential. Such an effort, one which consistently advocates and practices life-embracing compassion, equity, justice, peace, and solidarity, can work to eliminate injustice and violence. This inclusive, integral approach can help to build a mutually caring and sharing society. It does not tolerate exploitation and oppression. It seeks co-operation rather than confrontation. It is non-partisan in its partisanship for the poor. And it boldly appeals to the consciences and hearts of all citizens and politicians alike to introduce equitable laws, policies and practices that promote “peace, order, and good government”. We all must act in selfless service of the common good and public well-being of all, without discrimination of any kind, anywhere. Indeed, our human calling is not to benefit “just us” but to do justice—that is, to practice mutual respect and mutual responsibility.

But how do we actively engage politicians—and ourselves—in this foundational initiative? How do we purposefully walk with politicians, decision-makers and other neighbours along the path where communal compassion and public justice meet? How are we friendly neighbours without engaging in friendly fire? How do we constructively engage Stephen Harper, George W. Bush, Hillary Clinton, Stéphane Dion, Michael Ignatieff, Gerard Kennedy, Bob Rae, Gilles Duceppe, Jack Layton, Elizabeth May and their associates? And how do we strategically develop a Christian political presence that is public light, salt and hope, one that points to new ways of quality life, stewardly economics and justice-shaped politics?

Throughout my adult life I have sought to come to grips with these stimulating questions, and I offer part of my life’s work as one possible way.

As I prepare for and walk into private and public meetings with decision-makers, politicians and citizens—people from a variety of faith-communities and different value-convictions—I usually assume that the people I am interacting with want to do the right thing for all our neighbours. That’s the liberating law of the Creator, and it’s written on the human heart. God’s Spirit is at work in every person’s conscience, heart and life. Who are we to limit or stifle the Spirit of God—which, according to the book of Acts (*Acts 2:17*), was “poured out on all people”? Let’s resolve to practice a politics of humility. Let’s carefully listen to what God’s Spirit is saying today through Aboriginal peoples, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, socialists, capitalists, Conservatives, Liberals, New Democrats or Greens. Then let’s thoughtfully find common ground for common action to advance

the common good. The common good is then not individualistic self-interest but the overall well-being of humanity and community.

It was from this principled point of view that the diverse partners of the Ontario Multi-Faith Coalition for Equity in Education, for example, sought to carve out fair structural opportunities *within* the public system where all parents and students could equally experience educational choice and justice. Likewise, the national Working Group on Civil Unions obtained Intervener Status in the Supreme Court of Canada to advocate for the public-justice concerns and the legal-equality rights and responsibilities of all legally recognized couple relationships in Canada. The primary purpose of these and other pro-justice efforts is and has been to create adequate public space where, in a representative democracy, we as Canadian citizens engage each other in candid dialogue, frank discussion and mature debate. Then we would clearly acknowledge, both in law and in practice, the fundamental freedom and justice that all people are entitled to enjoy, without discrimination and without exception.

Ecumenical, multi-faith, non-partisan, passionate political engagements need allies and friends, not adversaries and enemies. We don't need opponents; we need proponents. Indeed, as Jesus' followers, we are always called to be and live *for* something worthwhile. We are not against this, that and the other thing. We are *for* integral human growth in the service of a flourishing community of communities that becomes a genuine mosaic of multicultural and multi-faith partners in the ongoing effort to promote the gentle reign of justice and peace. Because of that, the principles and priorities of government budgets and fiscal policies must change so that they effectively meet legitimate human needs. For example, for starters, why cannot at least half (50%) of the federal government's annual budget surplus be used conscientiously to help reduce the morally unacceptable homelessness and hunger that now plague poverty-stricken neighbours at home and abroad?

We are meant to be people of hope in common search of a hopeful, responsible citizenship. We are challenged to be bringers and doers of the Good News. And the Good News is always appealing. As Dr. H. Evan Runner alerted us, we are people of the thesis, not the anti-thesis. Our basic point is not that we are against war and violence (of course we are)—we are *for* peace and shalom. We are not, first of all, anti-Bush or anti-anyone else. Instead, we develop and propose alternative ways of life. We do not merely criticize and condemn but

rather suggest and propose. Therefore we say “suppose this or that begins to happen...,” or “you have probably thought about this...” We propose concrete options—recognizable alternatives that others may also be promoting. In that context, we affirm where we can and amend where we must. Thus we help to adopt and implement an appealing environment- and people-friendly agenda.

So we take this positive approach into meetings with the local MP, with Cabinet Ministers and their advisors, or with the House of Commons’ Standing Committee on Finance. And we carefully listen. The bottom line is that we need to be serious listeners who are prepared to change our own ways. For all participants—myself included—need to listen, learn and change. All of us need integral conversion. None of us, and no institution or organization, has all the answers. We try to find out which key problems and unavoidable realities politicians and researchers are or should be struggling with, and together we humbly search for creative alternatives and possible solutions. That’s how we communally build constructive alliances. Such alliance-building is not fabricating ideological boxes: it’s about developing long-term working relationships that enable us to be sojourners together on the way to a renewed, responsible politics—with and on behalf of the homeless, the hungry, the jobless, the refugee, the poor, all the vulnerable, and God’s good earth.

So we respectfully speak together about the actual crises that we face. We cannot be silent in the face of the ruthless economics of exclusion—the worsening crises in child care, elder care, health care, child and family poverty, homelessness, AIDS, pollution, terrorism and war. It is against the backdrop of these multidimensional challenges, and in recognition of the urgent need for an integrated approach, that we speak about and engage in public justice. Public justice for all is not an abstract social theory but a reality-oriented, hope-filled effort to work out as best we can the vital meaning of the Gospel, to say something new or to advocate something specific about what the Good News could mean for our society today. Public justice is a basis for a dynamic politics of inclusion and reconciliation, shaped by a deep concern for the public well-being of all (definitions of public justice and the common good are in our CPJ book *Justice, Not Just Us*). We must help to foster the national will in our media, social movements, educational institutions and political parties to spark concerted advocacy and concrete action for the public good of all.

As people of living faith—whether government leaders, citizens, academics, cooperators and co-belligerents for the common

good—we also face complex practical questions. We may not dodge them. Christians and people of other faiths may not become spiritually isolated. Escapism, fundamentalism and spiritual isolation lead to seclusion and a fortress mentality—even to a form of institutional apartheid. Escapism leads to separatism, which causes the marginalization of people, institutions and organizations. Indeed, the privatization and spiritualization of the Gospel lead to the secularization and division of life and politics, which in turn leads to alienation and confrontation, violence and war. I am reminded of Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Sons (*Luke 15:11-32*), in which the loving father invites both of his wayward sons to repent, come home and change their selfish ways—neither one is excluded. The elder and younger sons must each learn from their own journeys: the journey of isolation on the one hand and of indulgence on the other. Both paths break the covenant. But God calls all of us home, including our churches, institutions, organizations, nations and civilizations. We urgently need to think and act outside of the confining ideological boxes of greed, profiteering, self-indulgence, exploitation, racism, isolation and spiritualization. And we can't do that meaningfully without doing a lot of sensitive listening to other voices—to people like Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Oscar Romero, Tommy Douglas, Jane Jacobs, Ted Stott and Stephen Lewis—figures from our time who are prophets and prophetesses, like the Old Testament prophetess Deborah (*Judges 4 and 5*) and other heroes of the faith.

Remember, the fruits of the Spirit can increasingly become evident in deeds of faith, justice, mercy and love. These deeds are the seeds of wisdom and hope. Wisdom is to know the truth *and* to act truly. I hope and pray that more people will catch the vision and pursue the mission of joyfully living out of the healing grace of God's forgiveness, goodness, mercy, justice, peace, faith and love. God has told us what is good, and what the Lord requires of us: "to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (*Micah 6:8*). We should honour this prophetic imperative and persuasive invitation. Jesus charged the Pharisees, "lovers of money" (*Luke 16:14*), with having forgotten the cornerstones of the way (*Matthew 23:23*): "justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone (*Luke 11:42*). And he also tells all of us (*Matthew 5:3-11*):

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are those who mourn,

for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called the children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

These are biblical teachings and building blocks that lead to practical steps, concrete ways out of confusion, misery, blind alleys and dead-end streets while on our hope-filled journey, realizing that life is meant to be persistent advocacy for our neighbours' good.

Before I conclude I want to express my sincere thanks. I am deeply grateful to the Institute for Christian Studies for honouring me with this special degree tonight. You have now deprived me of an excuse I have used with people for years, namely that I do not have any academic degree. As an institution of insightful higher learning, together with other respected academics, you face complex economic, educational, political, social, philosophical and theological questions which cannot be avoided with a clear conscience or in good faith. The Institute and its many colleagues serve as a building block towards a better understanding of how to be of blessing and service in this deeply secularized culture. Our world belongs to God. It needs your wisdom. So does Canada, as it struggles to become a beacon of light, a justice-based democracy, a strong, free and generous nation in the service of humanity, an independent servant in the vanguard for the international common good rooted in justice for all.

I also want to express heartfelt thanks to all the dedicated colleagues and generous supporters of Citizens for Public Justice over the years. They have faithfully worked and willingly shared their deep commitment and diverse resources to help build living demonstrations of public justice, responsible stewardship, social harmony, community co-operation and genuine peace. They steadfastly continue to be dynamic affirmations of living faiths and core values at work in aid of poor and powerless people, and they remain empowering illustrations of active citizenship and solidarity rooted in love and respect for all, without discrimination against any.

I especially want to voice publicly my deep love and warm gratitude to Wynne, my faith-filled marriage partner for nearly 50 years. Wynne, your loving care, Christian commitment, expressed so practically and professionally in your social work and community outreach, has been and still is, a true inspiration. May we be given the health and strength to continue in whatever ways we can be of neighbourly service, wherever God provides opportunities to share our expressions of biblical love, justice and peace. Of course, our precious children Janice and Karen and their families are also uniquely supportive.

Remember, the inequitable status quo is morally unacceptable. As Isaiah pointedly reminds us even today (*Isaiah 58: 6-12*):

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
To undo the thongs of the yoke
to let the oppressed go free
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor
into your house;
when you see the naked, to
cover them,
and not to hide yourself from
your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth
like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring
up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before
you,
the glory of the Lord shall be
your rearguard.
Then you shall call, and the
Lord will answer;
You shall cry for help, and he
will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from
among you,
the pointing of the finger, the
speaking of evil,

if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the
afflicted
then your light shall rise in the
darkness
and your gloom be like the
noonday.
The Lord will guide you
continually,
and satisfy your needs in
parched places
and make your bones strong
and you shall be like a watered
garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be
rebuilt;
you shall raise up the
foundations of many
generations;
you shall be called the repairer
of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

As well, the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 makes clear that we are called “to overthrow the existing order” (“to bring to nothing the things that are”), because it leads to ways of death. In our inter-dependent world, Canada can serve as a beacon of freedom, justice and peace, inviting others to follow ways of hope, renewal and life. Jesus has shown us what makes for this abundant life. In the words of the apostle Paul (excerpts from *1 Corinthians 13:1-13*):

Now I will show you a better way....Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

...These three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.



The **Institute for Christian Studies** is a Christian graduate school that offers master and doctoral degrees. Faculty and students at ICS address contemporary thought in the way Jesus asked us: by bringing salt and light to the task of higher education - adding the flavour, the conviction and the illumination of faith to their studies. ICS graduates teach at many public and private colleges and universities around the globe and play leadership roles in other areas of society. The ICS is an affiliate member of the Toronto School of Theology at the University of Toronto, and an affiliate of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities.



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